



Integrating Toontastic into Reading Lessons: A Descriptive Study of Students' Engagement and Comprehension in Senior High School

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Abstract

This research explores the integration of *Toontastic*, a digital storytelling application, into reading lessons to enhance students' engagement and reading comprehension in a Senior high school (SMA) setting. The objective of this research is to find out how the integration of *Toontastic* into reading lessons influence students' engagement and reading comprehension in Senior High School. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the research involved classroom observations, student interviews, and analysis of digital storytelling products created by 24 eighth-grade students over a four-week period. The findings reveal that *Toontastic* significantly improved students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Learners actively participated in story construction, expressed enthusiasm, and demonstrated deep interaction with the reading materials. Furthermore, students' digital stories indicated improved comprehension of narrative texts, including accurate retelling, interpretation, and vocabulary use. The research highlights the value of digital storytelling as a learner centered approach that supports both engagement and textual understanding. It concludes with practical recommendations for educators and suggestions for further research, particularly in integrating technology into literacy instruction. This research contributes to the growing field of interactive media in education by providing insights into how digital tools like *Toontastic* can transform conventional reading practices.

Keywords: *Toontastic, Reading Comprehension, Students' Engagement*

Introduction

The ability to comprehend written text is one of an essential skill for Senior High School (SMA) students studying English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly in the 21st century education that demands not only on language proficiency but also critical thinking, creativity, and communication (Coiro et al., 2019; Zhang & Liu, 2021). For both vocational and general high school students, the skill interpreting and analysing written English material plays a crucial role in achieving academic success and preparing for literacy demands in future workplaces (Hidayati & Pardede, 2020; Setiawan, 2023). In the fields of applied linguistic and vocational English education, reading is not only viewed as a cognitive process but also as a social practice, shapes by interaction, engagement, and purpose (Lankshear & Knobel, 2020).

In Indonesia, Merdeka Curriculum represents a major transformation in national education policy. It promotes student centered, inquiry based, and technology enhanced learning environments which aims at preparing students for the challenges of modern society (Kemdikbudristek, 2022; Indrawati and Sutopo, 2023). This includes a call for innovation on how reading is taught, transitioning from passive word recognition to active, meaningful, and multimodal interaction with text. Reading activities are encouraged to incorporate digital technologies and to nature students' autonomy, creativity, and collaborative skills (Maulidah and Prasetyo, 2022; Syahril 7 Harahap, 2021).

However, there is a persistent mismatch between the policy aspiration and classroom realities. In Numerous Senior high school classrooms, English reading instruction is still predominantly reliant on textbooks, teacher centered, and focused on final product. Students typically read the text merely to answer comprehension question, rather than explore the meaning, share their thoughts, or connect the materials to their personal experiences (Rahmawati et al., 2020, Putri and Sari, 2021; Azizah et al., 2022). This conventional approach limits learners' opportunities to develop deeper comprehension and authentic language use, especially among students with varying levels of engagement and learning preferences (Kusumawardhani & Fauzan, 2020).

To address this gap with educational policy and actual classroom practice, there is a need for creative and effective teaching strategies. One promising solution is the use of digital storytelling, especially through tools like Toontastic, a free mobile application developed by Google that enables students to create animated stories using their own voice narration and visual characters. From an applied linguistic perspective, Tontastic supports the principle of multimodal discourse and task-based language teaching (TBLT), where language learning is achieved through meaningful interaction and performance in real-world-like tasks (Walsh, 2021; Nambiar et al., 2020).

The features of Toontastic, such as visual creativity, voice narration, and story organization, allow the students to retell, reshape, or invent stories, thereby

enhancing their understanding through multisensory and multimodal experiences (Indriani and Harahap, 2021; Warhani & Saputra, 2022). For vocational high school education, this approach is particularly relevant, as it emphasizes communication, media literacy, and creative expression skills valued in professional and technical settings (Yuliana & Nugroho, 2023; Handayani et al., 2024)

Although digital storytelling is widely acknowledged for its positive impact on education (Sari & Nugroho, 2020; Amalia and Lubis, 2024), much of the existing research in Indonesia has mainly concentrated on measurable result such as exam performance and vocabulary improvement. There is still a significant gap exploring how students interact with narrative text using platforms like Toontastic, especially within authentic classroom environments where learning is shaped by context, interaction, and social dynamics (Nasution & Pramudita, 2022, Anggriani & Mulyadi, 2023). Limited attention has been given to students' real-life experiences, pattern of assignment, and their ways of showing comprehension beyond standardized written assessment (Wulandari and Astuti, 2022).

To address this research gap, this study investigates the use of Toontastic in Senior High School reading instruction. It seeks to answer the question: How does the integration of Toontastic into reading lessons influence students' engagement and reaching comprehension in Senior High School? Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, this study examines students' interaction with narrative text through digital storytelling, paying closer attention to visible engagement behavior and indicator indicators of understanding. Instead of depending solely on conventional test result, this study emphasizes rich, contextual data to better capture the complexities and dynamic of the learning experiences (Huda et., all; 2023).

This research contributes to the field of applied linguistics by offering insights into how multimodal tools shape language learning in practice. It also offers implications for vocational English education, where communicative competence, creativity, and technology use are central. Ultimately, the study supports the broader pedagogical shift toward learner centered, digitally enriched literacy practices, in line with both national curriculum goals and global educational trends.

Literature Review

1. Reading Lesson

Reading instruction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings plays a crucial role in fostering students' academic literacy and supporting their long-term learning development. According to Grabe and Stoller (2013), effective reading lessons should prioritize rich text exposure, the teaching of reading strategies, and comprehension focused activities over memorization. In Indonesia, however, reading lessons are still largely teacher-centered, relying heavily on textbooks, vocabulary drills, and lecture-based methods, which limit students' opportunities to actively engage with texts (Putri & Sari, 2021). To address this issue, the Merdeka Curriculum (Kemdikbudristek, 2022) advocates for a more learner-

centered approach that promotes creativity, critical thinking, and meaningful contextual learning encouraging the integration of digital technologies to enrich reading instruction.

2. Students' Engagement

Engaging students plays a fundamental role in effective reading instruction and includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects (Sun & Gao, 2021). Learners who are engaged are more likely to take ownership of their learning process, pose meaningful questions, and relate new content to their existing knowledge (Zhang & Chen, 2020). Among these aspects, emotional engagement—such as interest and enjoyment—is particularly influential in encouraging participation, especially for learners who may lack reading confidence. In the context of EFL education, contemporary research has shown that incorporating interactive and multimodal tools enhances engagement by making reading activities more student-centered and dynamic (Liu et al., 2020; Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2022). When students are given the opportunity to customize their reading tasks and express their comprehension through various modes—such as visuals, audio recordings, and performances—their involvement and understanding of texts improve substantially (Nurhayati & Kusumawati, 2023).

3. Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension encompasses various cognitive processes through which learners derive meaning from texts by connecting background knowledge, analyzing context, and employing suitable strategies (Alharbi, 2021). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, this process can be more demanding because students often face limitations in vocabulary and grammatical understanding. As a result, instructional approaches like teaching vocabulary in context, using guided questions, and implementing interactive summarization play a vital role in supporting comprehension (Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2022). Recent research highlights those multimodal strategies—especially those involving visual elements and digital storytelling—effectively aid learners in understanding texts by enhancing their ability to make inferences, synthesize information, and remember key content (Papadakis et al., 2022; Nurhayati & Kusumawati, 2023). These approaches not only deepen students' involvement with reading materials but also help cultivate their critical thinking skills, which are essential for meaningful comprehension.

4. Toontastic in Teaching Reading

Toontastic is a digital storytelling tool that allows learners to create animated stories using customizable characters, voice narration, and scene organization, providing a dynamic space for students to convey their understanding of texts. Its educational strengths lie in its integration of reading, speaking, and visual expression, which collectively foster active engagement with content through

digital storytelling (Indriani & Harahap, 2021). This approach supports current trends in multimodal literacy, which promote the blending of verbal and visual communication to enhance students' construction of meaning (Papadakis et al., 2022). Recent studies have found that incorporating Toontastic into reading lessons improves students' grasp of narrative structure, enriches their vocabulary, and encourages more thoughtful interpretations of texts (Wardhani & Saputra, 2022; Maulidah & Prasetyo, 2022). In addition, the application promotes student autonomy and collaboration—key components of the Merdeka Curriculum and essential competencies in 21st-century learning.

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, which is well suited for exploring the experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of students during reading lessons integrated with Toontastic. The goal is to gain an in depth understanding of how Toontastic influences students' engagement and comprehension, capturing the complexities and contextual factors that quantitative methods might overlook.

The research was conducted at a public junior high school in Palopo city. Twenty-four eighth-grade students, aged between 17-18 years, were selected purposively to participate because they were enrolled in an English class that integrated Toontastic in reading lessons. The teacher involved was an experienced English instructor familiar with digital storytelling tools.

The instruments used to get the data were: 1) classroom Observation which aims to observe directly the students' behavioral engagement and interactions during Toontastic-based reading lesson. An observation checklist and field notes template were developed. The checklist focused on indicators such as on-task behavior, collaboration, use of Toontastic features, verbal and non-verbal expressions of interest, and time-on-task. Observations were conducted over six sessions, each lasting about 40 minutes, recorded by the researcher through detailed field notes. 2) Semi Structured Interview aims at capturing students' and the teacher's perspectives on the use of Toontastic for reading lessons, including perceived engagement and comprehension. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was prepared. Sample questions for students included: How do you feel when using Toontastic in your reading class? Can you describe how making a story with Toontastic helped you understand the text? What challenges did you face when using the app? The teacher interview included questions about instructional strategies, observed changes in student behavior, and challenges in implementation. Interviews lasted approximately 20-30 minutes each, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. 3) Document Analysis which aims to assess students' comprehension of the narrative texts by analyzing the digital stories and accompanying written narratives they created using Toontastic. A rubric was developed to evaluate narrative elements such as story structure (setting, characters, conflict, resolution), language use, coherence, and creativity. Digital

stories (videos) and scripts were collected and reviewed. The rubric was used by two independent raters to ensure consistency.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: 1) Familiarization: Transcribing interviews, reviewing observation notes and documents repeatedly to immerse in the data. 2) Generating Initial Codes: Coding relevant data segments related to engagement types (emotional, behavioral, cognitive) and comprehension indicators. 3) Searching for Themes: Grouping codes into broader themes, such as "increased motivation," "collaborative learning," and "enhanced narrative understanding." 4) Reviewing Themes: Refining themes by checking coherence and consistency within and across data sources. 5) Defining and Naming Themes: Finalizing theme names and detailed descriptions. 6) Producing the Report: Integrating findings with literature and research questions.

Results

The following discussion interprets the results of the data analysis. The findings are examined in relation to the theoretical framework and compared with previous research to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Students' Engagement

The integration of Toontastic into reading lessons significantly enhanced students' engagement, which can be categorized into behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement based on the observation checklist, interview transcripts, and teacher notes.

Behavioral Engagement

Observational data revealed that during the implementation of Toontastic in six reading sessions, over 80% of the students consistently showed active behavioral engagement. Students were: Collaborating in small groups to plan and produce stories; Taking turns operating the app and recording voiceovers; Voluntarily asking questions about narrative structure and vocabulary; and Showing excitement in completing their stories. For instance, Student R (age 13) was observed encouraging peers to rehearse dialogue lines before recording:

Extract 1

"Ayomi kita voice note lagi tapi kita pake ekspresi. Seperti di buku"

[Let's do the voice note again, but this time with more expression. Like in the book]

From the extract 1 we can see that this active participation was sustained across sessions, suggesting that Toontastic kept students physically and mentally involved in reading-related tasks.

Emotional Engagement

Students expressed enjoyment and interest in the storytelling process. Interview responses from 15 participants showed strong positive affective reactions:

Extract 2

"Saya senang dan kreatif saat membuat cerita. Saya tidak merasa bosan kayak dulu"
[I feel happy and creative when making stories. I don't get bored like before]

Extract 3

"Bukan hanya membaca tapi kayak ekting, menggambar dan belajar terjadi bersamaan"
[It's not just reading—it's like acting, drawing, and learning at once]

From the extract 2 and 3 we can interpret that the students like and enjoy learning reading comprehension using Toontastic. This aligns with previous studies (e.g., Kim et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022) indicating that digital storytelling fosters emotional investment, which is critical for sustained learning motivation. Students who were previously disinterested in reading became more involved due to the interactive, creative nature of Toontastic.

Cognitive Engagement

Through storyboarding and narration, students demonstrated deep involvement with the content. The requirement to retell or adapt stories necessitated comprehension, interpretation, and critical thinking. For example: Students modified endings, demonstrating inferential skills. They included character motivations in narration, showing interpretation beyond surface-level understanding.

Extract 4

"Saya harus mengerti ceritanya terlebih dahulu sebelum saya cerita. Jadi saya harus pikirkan apa yang terjadi dari text tersebut"
[I need to understand the story first before I can tell it. It makes me think more about what really happens in the text]

These findings highlight that engagement with Toontastic is not limited to entertainment unless it fosters sustained, meaningful thinking aligned with comprehension goals.

Students' Reading Comprehension

To assess students' reading comprehension, the researchers analyzed their Toontastic scripts, final digital stories, and follow-up interviews, focusing on their ability to recall, retell, and adapt narrative texts.

Text Understanding and Story Retelling

From 24 students: 20 students successfully retold key elements (setting, plot, conflict, resolution) with coherence. 16 students included inferred elements, such as implied character feelings or motivations. 12 students extended or personalized the ending, indicating a high level of text engagement.

The digital products were analyzed using a rubric adapted from Papadakis et al. (2022), focusing on content accuracy, coherence, language use, and creativity. Most students scored in the "Good" (41.6%) or "Very Good" (33.3%) categories. Here is a sample excerpt from Student's Toontastic script:

"The fox was not just hungry. He was also lonely because no one talked to him. So, he made a trick to make friends. But the crow got angry. In the end, the fox said sorry and they became friends."

This adaptation shows not only comprehension but also emotional interpretation and narrative development.

Vocabulary and Language Mastery

Analysis of students' narration showed improved vocabulary retention. By selecting characters and recording voice-overs, students internalized key phrases and descriptive terms. For example: 1) Use of sequence connectors: *then, after that, suddenly*. 2) Emotional vocabulary: *angry, excited, disappointed*. 3) Dialogue expressions: *"I will help you,"* or *"This is my plan."*

The teacher's journal reflected this as well:
"Students remember more vocabulary and sentence patterns when they use them in their own stories. Even shy students try to speak."

This finding supports Johnson & Miller (2021), who noted that combining narrative creation with reading improves retention and practical use of new vocabulary.

Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, it demonstrates that integrating Toontastic into reading lessons enhanced student engagement across behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions significantly. Students were observed to participate actively in group tasks, take initiative during voiceover recordings, and express enthusiasm during story creation. These actions indicate a significant level of behavioral engagement, implying that the use of Toontastic transformed the learning environment from a passive reading activity into an active process of constructing meaning. This aligns with Guthrie and Wigfield's (2019) claim that students who are actively engaged are more inclined to use comprehension strategies, particularly when learning allows for independence and creative involvement.

Students' cognitive engagement was most evident in their capacity to analyze, retell, and imaginatively modify narrative texts. To accurately recreate the stories using Toontastic, they were required to thoroughly comprehend the content, encouraging them to go beyond a superficial reading. This aligns with dual coding theory by Paivio's (2007) dual coding theory, which emphasizes the benefits of processing information through both visual and verbal channels. By utilizing various modes of representation, students seemed to develop clearer and more lasting understandings of the texts—an approach that enhances not only comprehension but also advanced thinking abilities such as drawing inferences and synthesizing ideas.

The comprehension findings further highlight Toontastic's positive influence on students' literacy development. A majority of students showed they could accurately recall key story components, interpret characters' emotions and intentions, and creatively implement narrative structures in their own digital storytelling projects. The frequent use of temporal and emotional vocabulary in their scripts and voiceovers suggests that students naturally acquired new words during the creative process. These outcomes reinforce the notion that language learning is more effective when learners engage in tasks that are personally relevant and contextually meaningful (Johnson & Miller, 2021). By enabling students to act as content creators, Toontastic seems to have offered such a meaningful learning environment.

However, the data also reveal variations in comprehension outcomes that appear to be linked to students' language proficiency. Although the majority showed progress in understanding, some students had difficulty expressing their ideas clearly in English, despite being actively engaged. This suggests that engagement by itself does not automatically lead to better comprehension, particularly when language limitations are present. As emphasized by Lee and Choi (2019), a learner's language proficiency plays a critical role in shaping their ability to comprehend texts. Therefore, the future use of digital storytelling tools such as Toontastic should include specific scaffolding measures, like sentence prompts, visual supports, and vocabulary lists to assist students with lower proficiency while still fostering strong engagement.

Conclusion

This research explored the use of Toontastic in reading instruction to evaluate its effect on students' engagement and reading comprehension through a qualitative descriptive method. The results indicate that Toontastic greatly improved students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement throughout the reading activities. Learners showed active participation, expressed enthusiasm, and displayed strong cognitive involvement in interpreting and retelling stories using digital storytelling. In terms of reading comprehension, students showed the ability to recall narrative elements, adapt story structures, and apply new vocabulary in context. Their creative outputs reflected not only surface level

understanding but also inferential thinking and personal interpretation of texts. The process of constructing digital stories helped internalize the narrative structure and content, thereby improving comprehension outcomes.

The study confirms that integrating Toontastic transforms reading from a passive, teacher centered activity into an interactive, learner centered experience. It aligns with constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes active involvement and multimodal engagement as catalysts for meaningful learning. However, the research also revealed limitations related to students' English proficiency, limited technological resources, and time constraints in classroom implementation.

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